

Evans, Information, & Being Of an Object

1. Evans on Object-Dependent Thought

A thought is Russellian if it is of such a kind that it simply could not exist in the absence of the object or objects which it is about. (G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, p.71.)

...a singular thought is a thought that would not be available to be thought or expressed if the relevant object, or objects, did not exist. It follows that if one utters a sentence of the relevant sort, containing a singular term that, in that utterance, lacks a denotation, then one expresses no thought at all; consequently neither a truth nor a falsehood. (J. McDowell, 'Truth-Value Gaps', p.204 in *Meaning, Knowledge & Reality*.)

Consequently, demonstrative thoughts about objects, like 'here'-thoughts, are Russellian. If there is no one object with which the subject is in fact in informational 'contact'—if he is hallucinating, or if several different objects succeed each other without his noticing—then he has no Idea-of-a-particular object, and hence no thought. His demonstrative thought about a particular object relies upon the *fact* of an informational connection of a certain kind, not upon the thought or idea of that connection; and hence it is unconstruable, if there is no object with which he is thus connected. (Evans, *op. cit.* p.173.)

A thought content is *object-dependent* where either (a) its existence or (b) its thinkability depends on the existence of an object

A psychological episode is *object-involving* where an instance of that kind of thinking occurs only if the relevant object exists

2. Evans on Information & Information States

In general, it seems to me preferable to take the notion of *being in an information state with such-and-such content* as a primitive notion for philosophy, rather than to attempt to characterize it in terms of belief... a fundamental (almost defining) property of the states of the informational system... [is] their 'belief-independence'. (Evans, *op. cit.*, p.123.)

...in order to understand [a Russellian] term, one must oneself believe that there is something to which the term refers. (This thesis is in fact implicit in my claim that such singular terms require information-based thoughts for their understanding, since, according to my explanation of the notion of information-based thoughts, such thoughts commit the subject to the existence of something as their object...) (Evans, *op. cit.*, p.326-7.)

We can speak of a certain bit of information being of, or perhaps from, an object, in a sense resembling the way in which we speak of a photograph being of an object...

The sense in which a photograph is of an object is as follows. A certain mechanism produces things which have a certain informational *content*. I shall suppose for the moment that this content can be specified neutrally, by an open sentence in one or more variables...

Red (x) & Ball (x) & Yellow (y) & Square (y) & On Top Of (x, y).

...Notice that I have explained the sense in which a photograph is of an object, or objects, without presupposing that a specification of its *content* must make reference to that object, or those objects. (*op. cit.* pp.124-5.)

...[this] introduces a use of the notion of the same (bit or piece of) information which deserves explanation, even though it is common. We want to be able to say that two informational states (states of different persons) embody the same information, provided that they result from the same initial informational event..., even if they do not have the same *content*: the one may represent the same information as the other, but *garbled* in various ways. Conversely, and obviously, it is not sufficient, for two informational states to embody the same information, that they have the same content. When two states embody *the same information*, they are necessarily such that if the one is of an object x , then so is the other. (Evans, *op. cit.*, pp.128-9)

A suggestion: apart from the general condition for the non-conceptual nature of certain states, that they can be possessed by animals and infants as well as mature humans; Evans has a condition for non-conceptuality which applies to the predicative or content related aspect of states; and one which relates to the quasi-referential aspect. In the case of the former the argument relates to fineness of grain; in the case of the latter it refers to belief independence of object-relatedness.

...let us switch to the other version of the story, in which the subject and his companion are *mistaken* in believing that their senses deceive them—there *is* a little green man on the wall. It seems clear that a subject in this situation, thinking within the scope of the pretence in the way I have outlined, would actually be thinking of that little green man—entertaining various thoughts concerning him. In allowing his thoughts to be controlled by the information, he is in fact responding to the properties of the little green man. (Evans, *op. cit.*, p.362)

Dummett objects to this concession on Evans's part:

Evans thus appears to be mistaken in claiming that the speakers engaging in make-believe discourse on the basis of what they take to be an illusion are referring to something actual if they are not in fact victims of any illusion; this claim is incompatible with his own principle making intention a necessary condition for reference. (Dummett, 'Existence' reprinted in *The Seas of Language*, at p.302)

3. Key Features of Information States

- (1) Information states are not individuated by their contents
- (2) Information states are abstract individuals – distinct pieces of information can have the same content, but differ only in their object;
- (3) Information states can be identical where their content differs: one can be a garbled copy of the other
- (4) Information states are tied to an object even in a subject's lack of belief that the information relates to that object

Evans's picture here is comparable to the story one might tell about photographs (perhaps with the exception of his account of garbling).

It fits the metaphysics of words (on Kaplan's account) and also that of symphonies on many views.

This picture of information contrasts with the Dretske approach to information (a kind of step-wise dependence on features of the environment).

In particular, Evans claims:

...note that memory and testimony are, in a sense made clear by the diagram, *recursive* elements of this structure. (Evans, p.127.)

4. Memory-Based Demonstratives

We should take note, however, of the possibility of cases in which the operation of memory takes place purely at the level of the informational system. In this sort of case, what memory ensures is the subject's possession of a *non-conceptual* informational state, whose content corresponds in a certain respect with that of some earlier informational state of the subject (a perceptual state); although its content differs from that of the antecedent perceptual state in that, if the subject is in the memory state, it seems to him that such-and-such *was* the case. (That is, memory states, even of this kind, are not free-floating images whose reference to the past is read into them by reasoning on the part of the subject.) (Evans, *op. cit.* p.239)

Should we take the ways in which memory and testimony are 'recursive' to be the same?

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